

SUFFERING FOR ONE'S ART

Doing research in the former Soviet Union is not always comparable to working with Canadian sources, as many CHA members will be aware, either through their own experience, or through the testimony of one of their slightly loopy colleagues who, for mysterious reasons, nevertheless like visiting the region. Indeed, after a fairly open period at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, from about mid-1991 to late 1993, gaining access to archives has increasingly become more difficult again. But it is not as if data about the Soviet past in particular have become the precious commodities that they were in the days of communism. Still, huge archives remain inaccessible for the Western researcher altogether (at this point, the notorious Archive of the President of the Russian Federation, located in the Kremlin, as well as the post-revolutionary archive of St. Petersburg belong to this category), or can be entered only against a fair(ly high) price and under great restrictions (such as the archive of the Former OGPU/NKVD/KGB).

What is, however, a great improvement these days in Russia and elsewhere is the freedom of movement that has been observed since 1991. No longer is one reduced to guided tours of which the itinerary has to be submitted to consulates (and permitted by them) long before departing for the area (although one still needs the official invitation by a Russian or a Russian institute in order to receive a visa). Indeed, travelling by car is probably unwise because of the road conditions and the attention foreign license-plates may solicit, but travelling by plane or train in the former land of Soviets is possible for any Westerner. Thus the researcher can visit provincial archives of the former Communist Party and Soviet State. There, one is treated in a friendly and quite respectful manner (I can commend the archivists of both Tver' and Nizhnii Novgorod) and doing research is often as easy (or even easier) as in Western archives. There, one does not find the gruff *militia* (police) officer as in most archives in Moscow who may demand, while sometimes feigning the imminent use of the short automatic gun he carries on his chest, one's archival pass, passport, a look in one's bag, or the placement of one's belongings in an unguarded cloakroom, easily accessible to any passer-by wandering in from the street. Instead, the head of the provincial archive does often his utmost to make the foreign researcher happy, proud to honour the Russian tradition of lavish hospitality to visitors.

Travelling, too, enables the researcher to meet with many Russians, as train travel necessarily is long-distance and time-consuming. On such ten-hour, twenty-four-hour, or week-long trips, one shares a compartment with at least one other person, and usually even with three others. Even though I have usually lived in apartments together with Russians during my four sojourns in Russia, and have thus been enabled to find out about

my hosts' ideas and opinions about things past and present, one does not get as much of a variety of stories and observations as on the trains. Making the prospect of train travelling even more enticing has been last year's equalization of the ticket price for foreigners with that of citizens of the Commonwealth of Independent States, so that a round trip Moscow-Rostov on the Don costs CDN \$50, which is a steal for a trip of some 3,000 kilometres that lasts a total of 40 hours.

And this travelling is made even more pleasant by a wonderful catering service available now on most trains, providing one with mineral water, sandwiches, and, on the 'Quiet Don' train that travels between Moscow and Rostov, caviar, Russian champagne, vodka, and grilled langoustines, all for rock-bottom prices (from our perspective). In case one does get tired from lying down on one's bunk-bed, one can stretch one's legs and breathe in some fresh air regularly, for the train stops at a frequency of about every one-and-a-half hours for ten to twenty minutes at major stations, where the local population is selling on the platforms any or all of the delicacies of its region to the passengers who disembark. The car conductor (*provodnik*) makes sure that no one gets on the train who is not supposed to be there and that all passengers return to the car on time before the train departs again. Meanwhile, soon after leaving Moscow the same provodnik appears with clean sheets and a pillow-case which make, with the usually already present pillow, mattress and blankets, for quite a comfortable bed during the night. Did I mention the *samovar* in each car and their air-conditioning yet? Remarkably, hardly a foreigner from the far abroad (from outside the former USSR) enjoys this luxury travel, and even more remarkably, the trains, with often some twenty cars and place for 600 people, are usually completely full in the summer.

Last summer, I thus visited St. Petersburg (on board the famous 'Red Arrow'), Nizhnii Novgorod, and Rostov, and spent some 90 hours on Russian trains in total. To mention but a few, I had vigorous conversations with a schoolteacher, a Belarussian geologist, a Cossack mother with son, an army veteran just released from the service after two stints in a tank in Chechnya, students, and an Armenian businessman.

But my travel was not all Oblomovite relaxation, discussing the meaning of life with fellow passengers while stretched out on our bunks. While my Russian visa was coming to an end and most of the work that I had set out to do was close to being finished by early July 2000, I finally was able to establish contact with an important *apparatchik* of the postwar Central Committee of the Communist Party under Stalin. He had been banished to Rostov on the Don in 1953 and had never returned to Moscow even though he could by the 1980s. Even though he was eighty years

old, he was healthy in body and mind and was willing to receive me in Rostov for an interview. A happy coincidence (for me) had forced the History Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the organization which has helped me on all my Russian trips in finding lodgings and supplying me with proper introduction letters to archives, to rent out part of its buildings to a travel agency. The agency bought me train tickets for all my trips, and arranged a hotel for my stay in Rostov as well.

The trip Moscow-Rostov went without a hitch. The next morning I interviewed my apparatchik for more than two hours. After seeing the Don and some other sights, I was brought by my local contact person to the railway station to begin the return trip to Moscow. The main station in Rostov was under repair so that, even though I had arrived there, I was not to depart from there but from a temporary suburban stop. Indeed, I had noticed that my ticket fro was not the mirror of the ticket to. I had already inquired after this in Moscow, somewhat anxious, with an eye on the map, that I would not cross into Ukrainian territory, as I did not have an Ukrainian visa. I had been assured then that that would not be the case. Indeed, we travelled via Riazan and Voronezh and bypassed Ukraine.

Being somewhat of a cautious character, I had again inquired from my contact person in Rostov, a travel agent, whether indeed my return trip would avoid Ukraine. She answered immediately in the affirmative but promised to inquire in any event. When asked again, she said that Ukraine would be bypassed by the return leg, although she added that even if we were going through Ukraine it would present no problem, as I was going from one Russian city to another Russian city. My own information told me that this was probably not true, but as we would not travel into Ukraine, it did not matter in the first place.

Arriving that evening on the platform, I found out that my train, originating from Pyatigorsk in the Northern Caucasus, would be delayed by an hour. I sat down on one of the benches along the platform where I was soon joined by a young man from Rostov with whom I struck up a conversation. At one point I inquired whether the train would even be more delayed, but he said that would be unusual and that we would therefore arrive in reasonable time in Moscow, unless the Ukrainian customs would be difficult. My heart skipped a beat. I told my interlocutor that I had no Ukrainian visa and that I therefore hoped that I was not going to meet any Ukrainian official at all. He replied that we were certainly going to travel through Ukrainian territory but that that should not matter as my destination was Russia.

The train arrived and I found my bunk. The three other passengers in my compartment continued a lively discussion that had

apparently started before my embarkation about the nasty quality of Ukrainian officialdom. The train left Rostov and after two hours, I began to relax. According to my reading of a very poor-quality map, we would at least be on Ukrainian ground by that time and we had not seen any customs' officer. An hour later I fell asleep. I woke with a start from a loud knock on the bolted door of our compartment. We removed the bolt and a uniformed man came in, announcing that he was an Ukrainian customs' official, and demanded to see our documents. With great trepidation I handed him my passport and Russian visa; he demanded my Ukrainian visa; I replied that I had none; he ordered me to gather my things. Via walkie-talkie, a conversation ensued in the corridor with the young officer's supervisor who categorically ordered me off the train. I was detained. Under escort, I stood by while the train for Moscow left. Then I was led through a decrepit station to a customs' office. There I was told to sit down while the other officers filed in. I was led into an office (after I was told that I could leave my bag behind in the waiting room...) where I was interrogated in Russian by two officers. A report was made up which I had to sign. The main interrogating officer was a fairly nice young man in his early twenties who, at the end of the paperwork and after his colleague had left, appeared to try to get money or another bribe out of me. I could only offer him a ballpoint, however, as I had no more than 500 rubles (or 30 dollars) left and I had been told that my apprehension meant the invalidation of my ticket. In other words, if I got back onto Russian soil, I would have to buy a new ticket. Why didn't I bring more money? Because I had a prepaid hotel room and a pre-paid train ticket and would be in Rostov for less than 24 hours. Although the trains have become such pleasurable means of transport in Russia, I did not think it wise to sleep in a compartment with three unknown fellow passengers with lots of money in the pouch that I carried around my neck. Credit card? One cannot use it in Russia much, and it is a desired object for criminals.

The study of history has many unexpected advantages: the pen and an historical explanation of the reason for Dutch sports' teams wearing orange satisfied my interrogator! Then I finally (this was around 4:30AM, some three hours after my detention) felt sufficiently bold to ask him about my further fate. I was told that I would be extradited to Russia by way of putting me on the next train in the direction of Rostov. The first train travelling in that direction would probably pass by at 10AM.

I was returned to the waiting room, where my bag appeared to stand where it stood before, with all its contents in it. Sitting on a hard plastic chair, I witnessed the dozen (or so) custom officers retreat into a neighbouring room, where they apparently could nap until duty called again. I was guarded by one field-phone

operator, who spent the time smoking and who communicated regularly with other customs' offices. Judging from one Russian-language conversation, he let the Russians know about the amount of Chechens crossing the border into Ukraine (as well as about my case). The door to the outside was bolted, so any plans to escape were discouraged as I would never have enough time to take the bolt off and run (and where to run to?).

Thus I spent five hours sitting. Every time I fell asleep, I woke up because my head snapped back. In the morning around eight, there was a change of shift. Toward ten I began to get excited. Ten o'clock came, the officers went outside, but I was left behind. I asked the officer taking care of the field phone why I was not put on the train. Had they not been told about me when they had replaced the nightshift? She (the only woman employee I met) gave an evasive answer. I began to plead, pointing out that in 48 hours, even my Russian visa was to expire (in my travel guide any efforts to prolong one's visa in Moscow were described as "entering the seventh circle of bureaucratic hell"). She showed enough compassion to approach her superior after the team returned from their inspection of the 10AM train. He then deigned to talk with me, explaining that I should not think of making any trouble, as I was powerless, and that I would be put on the next train only, the Kiev-Pyatigorsk express, in other words, on an Ukrainian train. He warned that I would probably have to pay the Ukrainian provodnik to reach Rostov. If not, I might be unceremoniously thrown off the train at the Russian side of the border.

Indeed, by noon the Kiev express arrived at redoubtable Ilovaïsk. I did march out with the Ukrainians this time to the train. A fairly long conversation between the customs ataman and one provodnik took place before I was allowed to board. I found a compartment in which two people were sitting, who both turned out to be Russians. I told them my story which made them take pity on me, particularly when I noted that an appointment with the Ukrainian provodnik was still awaiting me. The Russians supplied me with cookies and coffee before I was to face my ordeal. This was welcome as I had had my last meal almost twenty-four hours before and had lived on the mineral water and a piece of bread that I had brought along for the trip. As I still had to buy a new ticket, any thought of buying food on the train was out of the question. Somewhat refortified, I was called out by my Ukrainian nemesis. I was led into his compartment and asked how much I could pay. I stated that all I had was a few hundred rubles from which I still would have to pay a ticket to return to Moscow via a different route. I suggested that I could give him a 100-ruble note. After some negotiating, he grudgingly settled for 200.

My Russian friends praised my steadfast negotiating skills upon return to the compartment. This time we did meet Russian customs as well, but they were more than friendly, although their boss made a feeble attempt to entice me to part with any Western currency of which I might dispose (I had none on me). We reached Rostov by 4PM. I hurried out of the train in search of a bus that would take me downtown. I had decided that the best way of proceeding now was find my tourist agent and demand the difference between the money I had left in my wallet and the ticket to Moscow. In search of a bus stop, the police agent on service at the temporary station, where I stood once more after 24 hours, demanded my papers instead of answering me. Luckily enough, a more interesting case presented itself in a heavily laden itinerant trader who had apparently left the same train as I had. The militiaman dismissed me and waved, with some contempt, in the direction of several buses in a belated answer to my original question. I jumped onto one of them and reached the tourist agency before closing time to plead my cause (I had grown a heavy beard and smelled probably like a pigsty so that I did not have to do much convincing). Somewhat reluctantly (and in sharp contrast to her solicitous behaviour when I forked out 400 rubles to her the day before in exchange for driving me to the station), I was given the 100 rubles that I needed after it was inquired from the railway station how much money a ticket would cost to travel to Moscow. By 6:30PM, I embarked on the 'Quiet Don', which travels through strictly Russian territory. Although I was to travel for another 20 hours thereafter with no more than bread and water to sustain me, I enjoyed what was undoubtedly the best of all my Russian train trips last summer, relishing my narrow escape: I returned to Moscow just in time to catch my flight back to the West.

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